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Sheep Facts

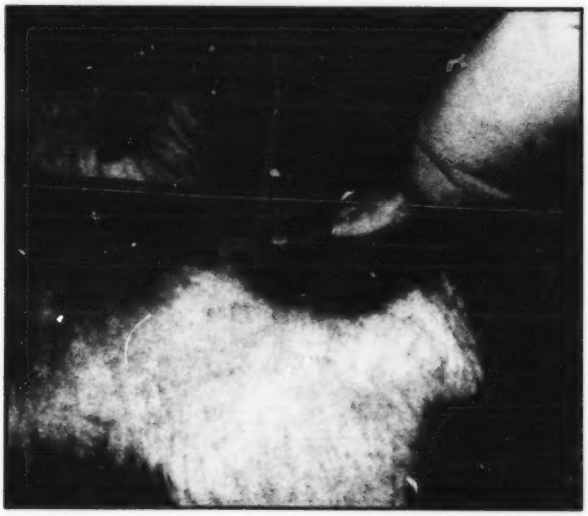
Body Condition Scoring of Ewes

The body condition of ewes at breeding affects the number of lambs born per ewe and the proportion of barren ewes in the flock. The degree of fat cover is an indication of an animal's body condition. However, it is difficult to visually assess the condition of a ewe since it is covered with wool. Condition scoring provides a convenient method of assessing this important factor based on a standard handling technique. Producers can regulate the nutrition of their ewes to have them at the optimum condition at breeding time to obtain the maximum productivity possible.

How To Condition Score

Condition is assessed by finger pressure along the top and sides of the back bone in the loin area, immediately behind the last rib and above the kidneys. The following points are assessed in order:

1. The sharpness or roundness of the spinous processes of the lumbar vertebrae (the bony points rising upwards from the back).



Feel the smoothness of the ridge formed by the vertical processes of the backbone. This is the first step in condition scoring. (The fingers are positioned in the loin area. A somewhat better location is further forward, immediately behind the last rib.)

2. The prominence and degree of cover of the transverse processes of the vertebrae (the bone protruding from each side of the backbone).

3. The extent of muscular and fatty tissue underneath the transverse processes is judged by the ease with which the fingers pass under the ends of the bones.

Feel the fullness of the underside of the loin. This is the third step in condition scoring. (The fingers should be pressed under the transverse processes of the spine.)

4. The fullness and fat cover of the rib-eye muscle (judged by pressing between the spinous and transverse processes).

The Scoring System

Everyone working with sheep has a personal method of assessing body condition, but descriptions of conditions are often very subjective since they use relative phrases such as "poor", "fairly good" or "excellent". What is assessed as "fairly good" to one producer may be "poor" to another.

Most sheep producing countries use a standardized system of body condition scoring based on a six-point scale from 0 to 5. In practice, points 0 and 5 are rarely used and most ewes score between 1 1/2 and 4 1/2. Scoring is made to 1/2 point accuracy.

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0 Extremely emaciated and on the point of death. It is not possible to detect any muscular or fatty tissue between the skin and bone.

1 The spinous processes are prominent and sharp. The transverse processes are also sharp. Fingers pass easily under the ends, and it is possible to feel between each process. The loin muscles are shallow with no fat cover.

2 The spinous processes are prominent but smooth. Individual processes can be felt only as fine corrugations. The transverse processes are smooth and rounder, and it is possible to pass the fingers under the ends with a little pressure. Loin muscles are of moderate depth, but have little fat cover.

3 The spinous processes have only a small elevation, are smooth and rounded. Individual bones can be felt only with pressure. The transverse processes are smooth and well covered, and firm pressure is required to feel over the ends. Loin muscles are full with a moderate degree of fat cover.

4 The spinous processes can just be detected with pressure as a hard line. The ends of the transverse processes cannot be felt. Loin muscles are full with a thick covering of fat.

5 The spinous processes cannot be detected even with firm pressure. A depression exists between the layers of fat where the spinous processes would normally be felt. The transverse processes cannot be detected; the loin muscles are very full with very thick fat cover.

When To Condition Score

Condition scoring can be done at any production stage, but it is most useful in achieving optimum flock condition at breeding time. Poor conception rates can be expected from both over-fat and very thin ewes. Ewes in optimum condition (3 to 4) will have a higher ovulation rate, less embryonic loss than ewes scoring 2 to 3, and should produce 20 to 60 more lambs per 100 ewes.

Although scoring at the beginning of breeding demonstrates the importance of a good body condition on subsequent performance, it is too late to feed to improve the ewe's condition. To allow sufficient time for improvement, flocks should be scored six to eight weeks before the rams are turned out since body condition can be markedly influenced by feeding and management at this stage.

Producers may wish to divide the flock after condition scoring. Those ewes scoring over 2 1/2 can be managed in the usual manner, while those under 2 1/2 can be given special treatment to allow them to reach a score of 3 to 4 when the rams are introduced.

The flock could be condition scored again just prior to breeding, and those scoring under 3 separated for later breeding.

Body condition scoring is easy to learn and does not require any equipment. Properly used, it allows producers the opportunity to ensure optimum ewe condition at breeding time for maximum productivity. However, producers may find that certain ewe types will not always fit neatly into the categories available, and they may find that a lower or higher condition score is more productive for their flock.

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